

Care Counts in Crisis: College Admissions Deans Respond to COVID-19

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Introduction

In 2016 Making Caring Common launched Turning the Tide, an initiative endorsed by almost 200 college admissions leaders, focused on shifting the messages high school students and parents receive about what's important in college admissions.

Turning the Tide underscored that what's important in college admissions is not long brag sheets of accomplishments but meaningful engagement in learning and meaningful ethical engagement, especially concern for others and the common good. Turning the Tide also promoted a variety of steps for increasing equity and access for underrepresented students. Over the last few years, Making Caring Common has collaborated with colleges to make institution-specific changes that are aligned with these goals. We have also partnered with admission leaders and researchers in several efforts to advance these goals, including a project on providing far better, more usable information to underrepresented students in the college search process and a project on assessing ethical character and social and emotional skills in college admissions.

Then came a pandemic, which has brought with it tremendous challenges and stresses for students, families, and schools in this country and around the world, and has

generated all sorts of questions, anxieties and misconceptions about what college admissions offices expect and value during this time. The deans' collective statement below, endorsed by more than 300 college admission deans, seeks to harness the collective voices of college admissions deans to break through these misconceptions and to clearly answer these questions. It also seeks to continue to advance the goals of Turning the Tide.

The deans seek in this document to underscore their commitment to self-care, care for others, equity, and meaningful learning. They express their commitment when reviewing applications to carefully taking into account the many challenges and obstacles students are currently facing, and they encourage students to share information about these challenges in their applications.

We hope this document will relieve some of the stress that students and families are experiencing. And we hope it will get us closer to a college admissions process that is saner and more equitable and that encourages young people to both care for themselves and to build a healthier, more humane, and just world.

—Rick Weissbourd, Trisha Ross Anderson, and Brennan Barnard, *Making Caring Common at the Harvard Graduate School of Education*

What We Care About in This Time of Crisis: A Collective Statement From College Admissions Deans

As admission and enrollment leaders, we recognize that we and the institutions we represent send signals that can shape students' priorities and experiences throughout high school. This collective statement seeks to clarify what we value in applicants during this time of COVID-19. We are keenly aware that students across the country and the world are experiencing many uncertainties and challenges. We primarily wish to underscore our commitment to equity and to encourage in students self-care, balance, meaningful learning, and care for others.

More specifically, we value the following:

1. Self-care

Self-care is of high importance, especially in times of crisis. We recognize that many students, economically struggling and facing losses and hardships of countless kinds, are simply seeking to get by. We also recognize that this time is stressful and demanding for a wide range of students for many different reasons. We encourage all students to be gentle with themselves during this time.

2. Academic work

Your academic engagement and work during this time matters to us, but given the circumstances of many families, we recognize that you may face obstacles to academic work. We will assess your academic achievements in the context of these obstacles. In addition, we will assess your academic achievements mainly based on your academic performance before and after this pandemic. No student will be disadvantaged because of a change in commitments or a change in plans because of this outbreak, their school's decisions about transcripts, the absence of AP or IB tests, their lack of access to standardized tests (although many of the colleges represented here don't require these tests), or their inability to visit campus. We will also view students in the context of the curriculum, academic resources, and supports available to them.

3. Service and contributions to others

We value contributions to one's communities for those who are in a position to provide these contributions. We recognize that while many students are not in this position because of stresses and demands, other students are looking for opportunities to be engaged and make a difference. This pandemic has created a huge array of needs, whether for tutoring, contact tracing, support for senior citizens, or assistance with food delivery. We view responding to these needs as one valuable way that students can spend their time during this pandemic.

We also value forms of contribution that are unrelated to this pandemic, such as working to register voters, protect the environment, combat racial injustice and inequities, or stop online harassment among peers. Our interest is not in whether students created a new project or demonstrated leadership during this period. We, emphatically, do not seek to create a competitive public service "Olympics" in response to this pandemic. What matters to us is whether students' contribution or service is authentic and meaningful to them and to others, whether that contribution is writing regular notes to frontline workers or checking in with neighbors who are isolated. We will assess these contributions and service in the context of the obstacles students are facing. We also

care about what students have learned from their contributions to others about themselves, their communities, and/or their country (Please see Turning the Tide for additional information about the kinds of contributions and service we value). No student will be disadvantaged during this time who is not in a position to provide these contributions. We will review these students for admissions in terms of other aspects of their applications.

4. Family contributions

Far too often there is a misperception that high-profile, brief forms of service tend to "count" in admissions while family contributions—which are often deeper and more time-consuming and demanding—do not. Many students may be supervising younger siblings, for example, or caring for sick relatives or working to provide family income, and we recognize that these responsibilities may have increased during these times. We view substantial family contributions as very important, and we encourage students to report them in their applications. It will only positively impact the review of their application.

5. Extracurricular and summer activities

No student will be disadvantaged for not engaging in extracurricular activities

during this time. We also understand that many plans for summer have been impacted by this pandemic, and students will not be disadvantaged for lost possibilities for involvement. Potential internship opportunities, summer jobs, camp experiences, classes, and other types of meaningful engagement have been cancelled or altered. We have never had specific expectations for any one type of extracurricular activity or summer experience and realize that each student's circumstances allow for different opportunities. We have always considered work or family responsibilities as valuable ways of spending one's time, and this is especially true at this time.

Reporting information that is important to students and to us

We will gather information from schools themselves about curriculum and academic resources and supports, but we

encourage students to communicate any factors specific to their circumstances that impeded their academic performance. Those factors might include, for example, lack of access to the internet, no quiet place to study, or the various family responsibilities described above. We encourage students to describe concretely how any of these circumstances have negatively affected their academic performance or ability to engage in activities that matter to them. It is helpful to know, for example, how much time students spent per week taking on a family responsibility, such as taking care of a sick relative. This information will be treated completely confidentially.

Both the Common Application and the Coalition for College application provide opportunities for students to describe how they have been impacted by the pandemic.

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